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THE BATHING POOL

Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art  
HUBERT ROBERT

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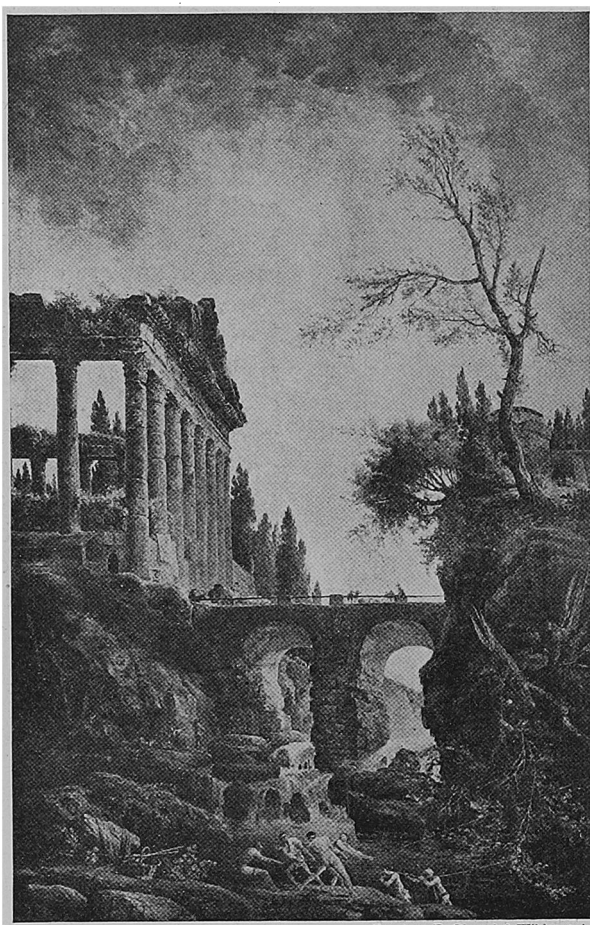
## Hubert Robert

BY ANDRÉ RUEFF, ASSISTANT CURATOR, BROOKLYN MUSEUM

IT was in the fifties, at a time when the interest in Hubert Robert's paintings was not very great, that Charles Blanc wrote the following criticism of Hubert Robert's work: "... Playing with the brush and the pencil, his paintings, always treated in a decorative manner, are finished as soon as they appear to him to be so." The collector of today, to whom the minutely painted, story-telling picture of the first half of the Nineteenth century makes but little appeal, has done justice to the great decorator of the end of the Eighteenth. Not that Hubert Robert lacked recognition during his life-time: his was a very successful career indeed, both from the pecuniary and honorific stand-points of the time.

Hubert Robert was born in Paris, the 22d of May, 1733; a writer pictures him as a man of heavy features, with the face of an Arab and the nature of a Chief of a smugglers' gang. But he had all the characteristics of the Parisian temperament, artistic, witty, restless. As a student at the Collège de Navarre he had for teacher the Abbé Le Batteux, a man well known in his time, the writer of several books on *Le Beau*, who is today totally forgotten.

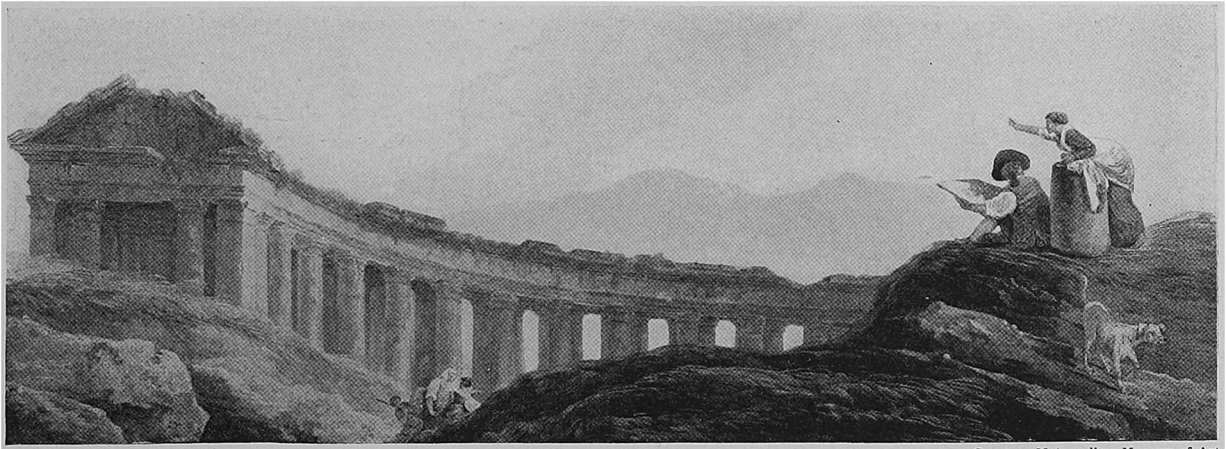
One day Hubert was caught by the Abbé with a drawing of a *Mousquetaire* he had just made on the back of his copy of a Greek translation, with the result that while his family wanted him to study for the priesthood, he was coached in his nat-



THE TORRENT

Courtesy E. Gimpel & Wildenstein

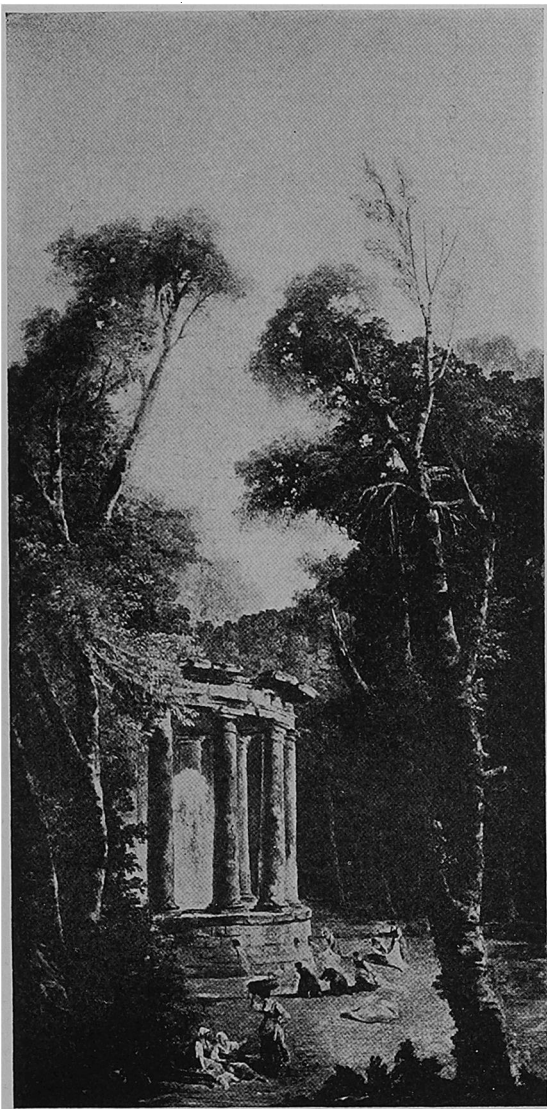
HUBERT ROBERT



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

COLONNADE IN RUIN

HUBERT ROBERT



Courtesy E. Gimpel & Wildenstein

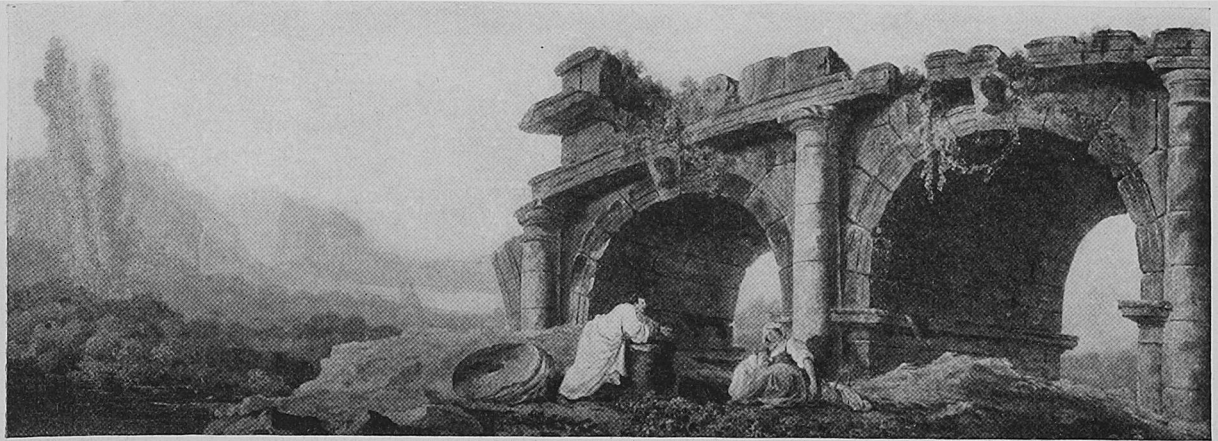
THE FOUNTAIN OF VESTA

HUBERT ROBERT

ural inclination of becoming a painter. Hubert Robert was twenty years old when, his school days being over, he went to Rome to study art. He was immediately impressed with the beauty of the ruins of antiquity so abundant in the Eternal City and the surrounding country. He studied for a while under Giovanni Paolo Pannini (1691-1764) and spent considerable time sketching and painting the galleries, gardens, colonnades, the Colosseum, the Arch of Titus and other architectural objects, always trying for effect rather than for literal representation of the actual condition of the monuments as he found them, adding here and there a little humorous note, such as the figure of a blind beggar or of a passer-by. He exhibited early. The people of Rome, who had never before paid much attention to the beauties of antique ruins, perhaps by reason of their familiarity with the ancient remains, now came to admire them, in the graceful compositions of this artist and paid him such high compliments that his reputation soon reached M. de Marigny and M. de Choiseul, the latter being the King of France's Ambassador to the Pope. With M. de Choiseul's good will he was able to obtain an allowance from the royal purse besides being able to study under Charles Joseph Natoire (1700-1777) then Director of the French Academy in Rome.

His restless disposition and his love for adventure brought him many difficulties,





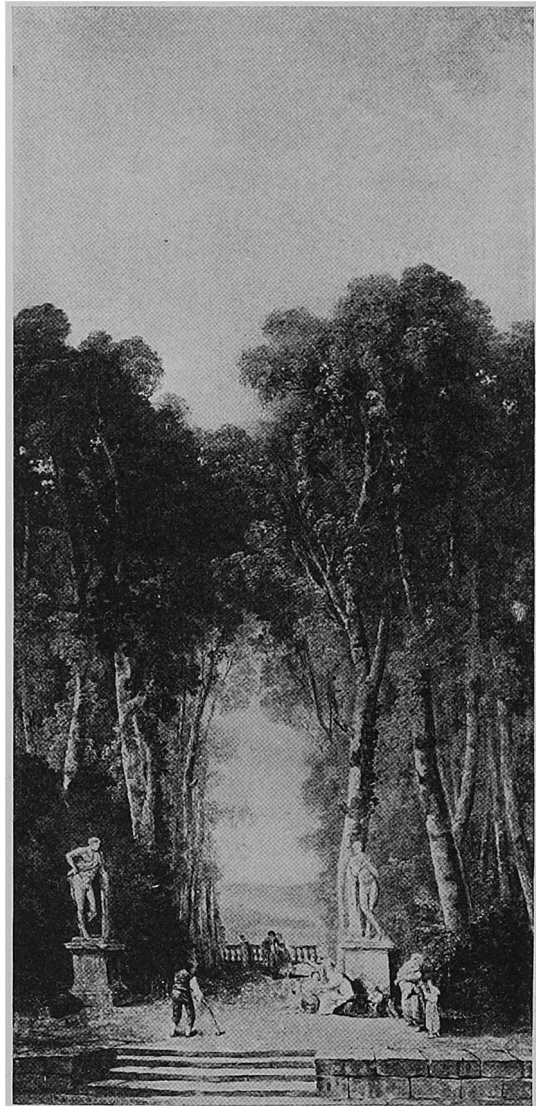
ARCHES IN RUIN

Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

HUBERT ROBERT

sometimes even placing him in danger. He is said to have walked around the Dome of St. Peter using the cornice as a foot path. Once he went at night to the top of the Colosseum, climbing over masses of crumbling stone walls, and affixed a cross to the topmost section of the ruins. The next morning the populace noticed the sudden change in the appearance of the celebrated Roman Amphitheatre and started to shout, "Miracle!" Robert tried in vain to explain how the cross happened to be placed there; the crowd refused to believe him, and had he not been able to find a refuge he would have been stoned to death. The Pope, however, learned of the incident; he called the young artist to him, congratulated him on his audacity and dismissed him loaded with presents.

His companions in Rome were Fragonard and the Abbé de Saint-Non, the engraver, much less known than the former although a worthy artist in his line and the man who engraved many of Robert's compositions. Together they went to Naples, Sorrento, Capri, the Vesuvius, visiting the ruins of Herculaneum. Robert made a great number of sketches during this period and, with the ones he made previously, he returned to Paris in 1767 where he held an exhibition at the Palais du Louvre. Then success came to him. For his *Port of Rome*, a view of the Pantheon of Agrippa, he was made a member of the Academy of Paint-



THE REST IN THE PARK

Courtesy E. Gimpel &amp; Wildenstein

HUBERT ROBERT



Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

THE CONCERT

HUBERT ROBERT



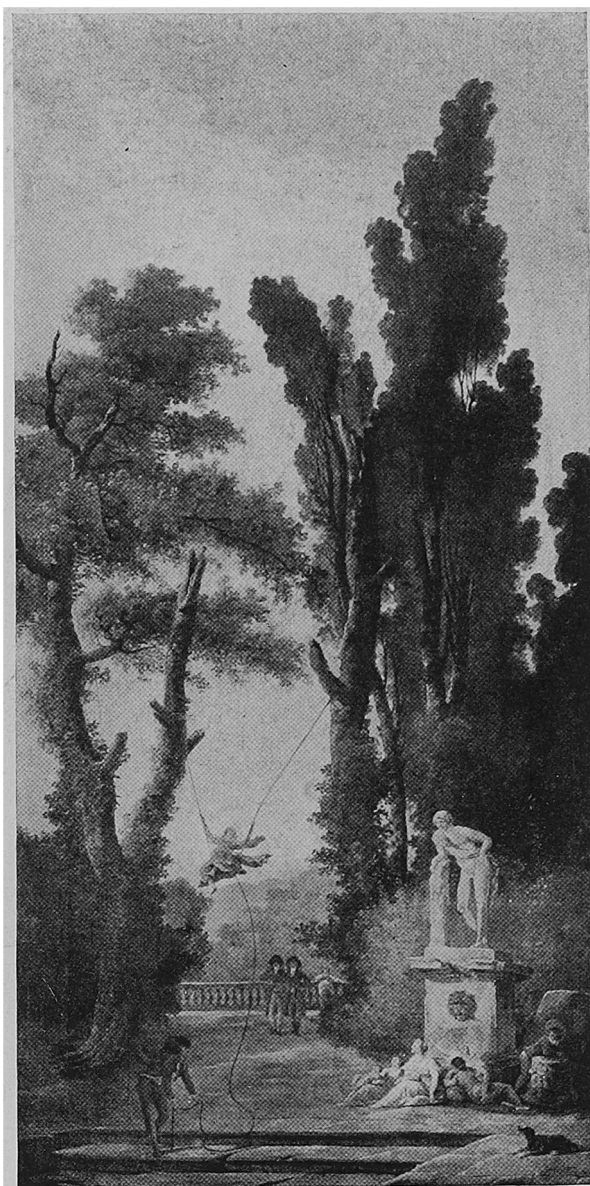
Courtesy E. Gimpel & Wildenstein  
THE PORTICO OF A COUNTRY MANSION  
HUBERT ROBERT

ing. Diderot, who greatly admired his works, La Harpe, Buffon, Joseph Vernet, Greuze, Visconti, Lekain were his friends. Voltaire, then eighty, and the most popular man of the day, had him paint the decorations for his theatre at Fernay, where the great philosopher's last tragedy *Irene* was about to be given.

Catherine of Russia, at the request of whom many artists of distinction had gone to St. Petersburg, tried vainly to bring him to her court. The King of France made him Curator of the Museum and also "Dessinateur des Jardins." This last title, equivalent to "Landscape Architect to the King," gave him the opportunity to plan and carry out the Bosquet des Bains d'Apollon in the park of the Chateau de Versailles.

Pierre de Nolhac, in his "Versailles and the Trianons" (Dodd Mead and Company), writes of Robert's work in the Versailles gardens as follows: "The large Grove of the Baths of Apollo only dates from 1778. It replaced several groves of older date that were planted and done away with at various times."

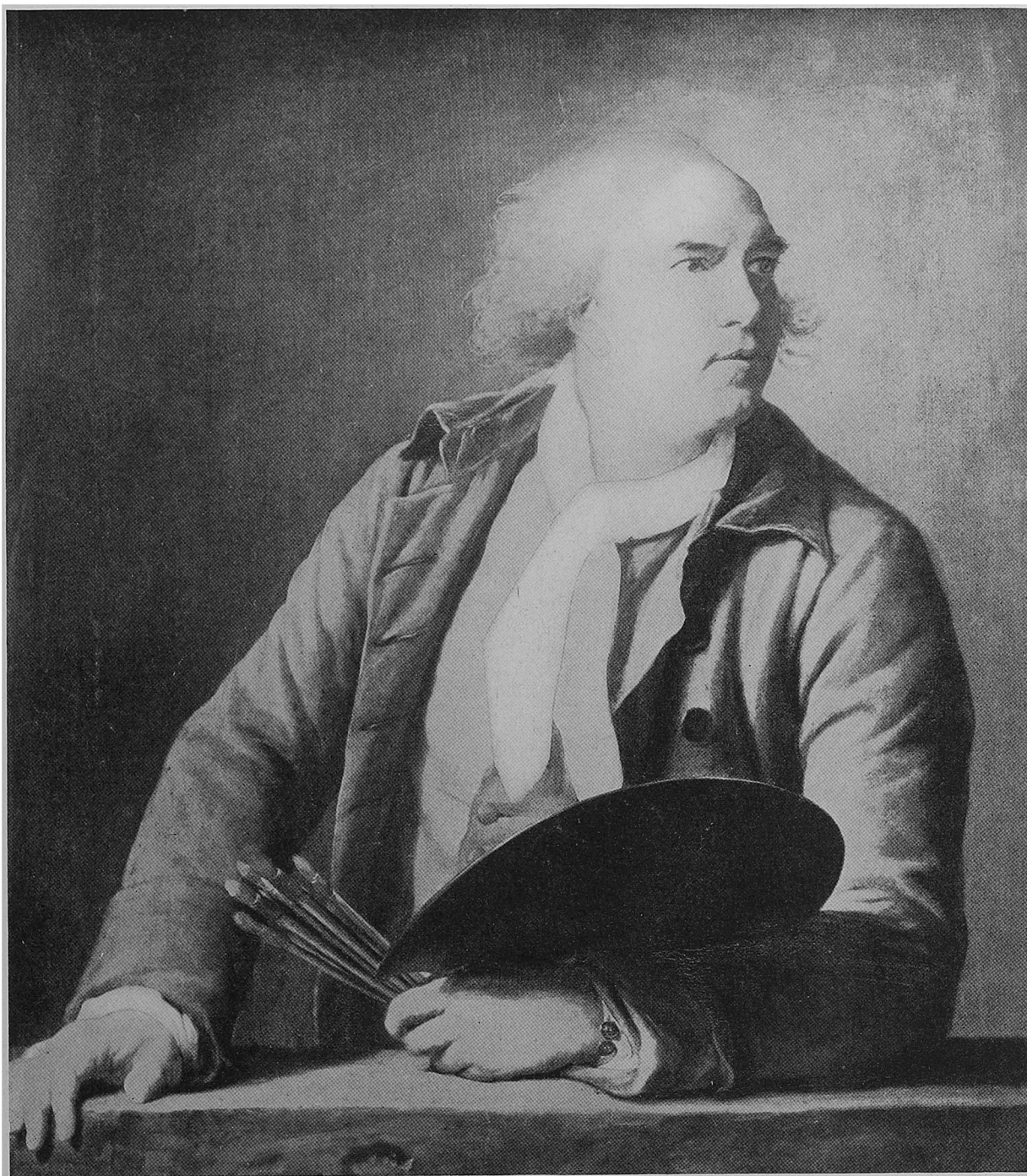
"The celebrated group *Apollo Attended by Nymphs*, which during the earliest days of Versailles under the Grand Roi adorned the famous Grotto of Tethys, was finally brought to this spot. From



THE SWING

Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art  
HUBERT ROBERT





Louvre Collection

PORTRAIT OF HUBERT ROBERT

MME. VIGÉE LE BRUN

the Grotto of Tethys it was taken to the Grove of Domes; there it was placed under some gilded canopies in the first grove of the Baths of Apollo; finally, under Louis XVI, Hubert Robert, the great landscape gardener, in obedience to the taste of the day, designed for this

corner of the vast French garden a very beautiful 'English' one."

With Mique, Robert built the Hamlet in the *jardin* of the Petit Trianon in 1782-1786. Then came the Revolution and with it the Terror. Arrested, he was sent to the prison of St. Lazare





Courtesy E. Gimpel & Wildenstein

A VIEW OF ERMENDALE. THIS PICTURE DEPICTS THE TOMB OF JEAN-JAQUES ROUSSEAU. HUBERT ROBERT

where he had for companions André Chénier, the poet, Millin, Roucher and many others. He kept his spirit, always was cheerful. He painted portraits or landscapes on anything he could use—plates, tables, the backs of chairs. Once he was given a larger cell and some canvas and he painted his *Taking of the Prisoners by Torchlight in Open Carts from the Prison of St. Pelagie to St. Lazare*. He had been sentenced to death; one day the gaoler came in and, among many others, called his name. There happened to be in the same prison another unfortunate bearing the same name who answered the call, thereby unwittingly saving the life of the artist.

After staying ten months in jail,

the trying days came to an end, and once again, although more than sixty years old, Hubert Robert journeyed to Italy.

He did not remain away very long. When he returned to France the Directoire appointed him Custodian of the Louvre. He died of apoplexy in Paris the 14th of April 1808.

Hubert Robert etched a small number of plates, among them a set of ten views called *Les Soirées de Rome*. His painted work is extensive.

Some of the finest examples are in American collections, private and public, including eight canvases in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the generous gift of Mr. J. Pierpont Morgan in 1917.